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ABSTRACT

According to J. Piaget, the child continually constructs or refines previous constructions in defining reality. Taking Piaget's lead, a study attempted to describe how children construct reality, with particular emphasis on the role of television in that construction. Four young children were observed and audio taped in viewing situations in their homes. Data were analyzed for recurring patterns that would suggest ways in which the young children were structuring the reality of their world as that world involved television. It appeared that there were three things that influenced young children when they attempted to deal with questions about reality: (1) experiential background, (2) state of development (Piaget), and (3) the rule making that children engage in when cued to move to more abstract thinking in which they may feel somewhat less comfortable or which they may view as unnecessary. The findings suggest that the young child is an active communicator, manipulating the television situation and even the television messages (through performance) in order to apply meaning to what is being observed. In applying meaning, the child uses and eventually overgeneralizes rules, consistent with experiential background and stage of development, to make sense of television in his or her culture. Repetition in commercials and cartoons, often boring and annoying to adults, appears to be of assistance in helping the child apply meaning to television material. (HOD)

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FOUR YOUNG CHILDREN CONSTRUCT REALITY:

TELEVISION WATCHING IN THE HOME

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FOUR YOUNG CHILDREN CONSTRUCT REALITY:

TELEVISION WATCHING IN THE HOME

One afternoon in the late 1960s, a sixth-grade class and its teacher were watching a description on a classroom television monitor of the progress of astronauts on a rocket traveling to orbit the moon. As the children sat silently the teacher became concerned with their apparent lack of enthusiasm and assumed that they did not fully understand what was happening. Walking to the window, the teacher said: "Boys and girls, don't you think this is one of the most exciting things you have ever seen? Right now, out there, [pointing out the window] a rocket ship is headed for the moon!" After a moment's silence, one boy offered: "Aw, that's just on TV."

The teacher was, of course, this researcher. As interesting as the boy's statement was, it was doubly interesting that none of his classmates disagreed with him. Years later, the following exchange took place between the researcher and her daughter.

Jenny 4/4/79 5:50 p.m. 5;3 years

I asked Jenny, in the car driving home, how she would like to be from _____ ((another state)), if I took a job there. She couldn't be from _____((our present state)) anymore, I said. She yelled no, she didn't want that.

Rs: Well, how about Alaska?

J: No.

Rs: How about...Kansas?

J: ((after a pause)) There's no such place as Kansas. It's just on Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz.

The question of what reality is perceived in communication in our culture is of great interest to those who deal with communication through reading, through television, or through other media. It was the purpose of the study

reported here to describe how young children perceive reality as it relates to television. That exact question of perception of reality in relation to television has been of interest in the last several years to researchers engaged in television-related study. Almost all studies have employed quantitative methodology. Although the work to date is intriguing, there is much unanswered in that body of work, as those researchers themselves are well aware. As I first attempted to study the question of perception of reality and television, I too devised a laboratory study. My choice involved showing children short segments of television shows and questioning them with open-ended questions after each segment. I quickly became aware that the terms "real" and "reality" were very complex and that I was uncomfortable attempting to interpret subjects' answers in that setting. Since methodology involving naturalistic techniques is designed for dealing with questions of such complexity and offers the advantage of data collection in a context which supports and fosters interpretation, I soon realized that natural methodology was the method of choice for the study.

It seems appropriate at this point to alert the reader to an important distinction which came to be made in the study. The term "perception of reality" was too narrow a term to deal with in the study until the end. It became necessary first to attempt to get the larger picture of what was happening as the child viewed television. Then perhaps, I could attempt to deal with the sort of "errors in perception" that I had seen and that other researchers reported. Fortunately, Piaget's (1973) work with young children gives us a way of discussing how the child forms reality conceptions by using a term that is more encompassing and that perhaps assumes more action on the part of the child, than the term "perception." Piaget sees the child as constructing

what he or she comes to know. The child continually constructs, or refines previous constructions, in defining reality, which is life as the child views it. Taking Piaget's lead, then, this study will attempt to describe how children construct reality, with particular emphasis on the construction in connection with television.

Two concerns soon became apparent: (a) how to study this question through use of the child's language and behavior, and (b) how to learn about (get inside) the child's view in a setting where reality formation about television is most likely to be in process. To deal with these concerns, I observed four children watching television in their homes. The first was my daughter, upon whose television related behavior I kept notes from the age of 4;1 to 6;5 years. The other three children were three five-year-olds in my daughter's nursery school. I observed and taped (audio) in the viewing situations in their homes. I analyzed the language in representative samples of the data in order to observe what patterns were present in the data. From the patterns a model of reality construction in relation to television was identified and theoretical propositions related to the model and to the patterns observed in the data were presented and explicated. Finally, the narrower question of perception of television reality, the question with which the study began, was returned to and insights gained were applied to describe the process of forming judgments on the reality of television material.

Key Studies from Research on Children's Perception of Reality in Relation to Television

There appeared over the years in television research, four ways in which questions about children's perceptions of reality in connection with television could be raised. The first was the question of televised violence and its

relation to aggressive behavior in children. Some research appeared to support, other research to disavow, any causal connection. After the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior issued its report (1972) suggesting a tentative indication of a causal relation which operated only on children predisposed to be aggressive, and operated only in some environments, research in this area underwent a shift. Researchers, in the words of Drabman and Thomas (1975), "suggested that continued exposure to violence on television might lead to an emotional blunting or an altered concept of the place of violence in society" (p. 86). In other words, they were asking themselves whether, when children viewed a great deal of violence, there would be a change in their perceptions of the real world.

Feshback (1976) postulated that a mindset that diagnosed the violence viewed as reality or fantasy would be important in the child's eventual reaction. Indeed, when he showed older children a film that portrayed campus violence and involved newsreel and movie sequences, and then allowed the children to aggress against him (in playing a game), those children who saw the film as "real" were much more aggressive. So the question of the effect of violence in a real or fantasy framework is the first route through which the question of children's perceptions of reality was raised.

A second route was the concern over the medium's ability to disguise what was taking place (Baggaley and Duck, 1976). Does Superman really fly? Does Wonder Woman really jump over high obstacles? Television is very entertaining when it uses its inherent capabilities to expand the camera's view of the everyday possibilities. The medium is also very capable of fooling us, adults and children.

The third route to the question of the child's perception of reality was

the suggestion that television programs and commercials stereotyped women and minority groups. How does this affect the child's view of the world (Pingree, 1978)? A fourth route was the concern that commercials take unfair advantage of the young child. Children cannot protect themselves cognitively from advertisers, so went arguments. If the advertiser suggests that the food is good, the child will beg for it in the store. The child does not comprehend the motivation that drives the advertiser: the selling of a product. The child accepts the claim at face value, or at the literal level.

In the late seventies, studies on children's "perception of reality" or "perceived reality" began to be reported. The phrase "perceived reality," refers to the amount of reality the child credits the program or characters or events with. It also refers to the amount of reality credited to television in comparison with the real world. The older the child, the less perceived reality. Therefore, the less perceived reality, the better. (The less perceived reality, the more like the adult's view.) "Perception of reality" is the fit between aspects of reality the child sees and the way "things really are" (to the researcher). The first expression has an absolute standard and is used with a scale: the less perceived reality, the better. The second has a relative standard: if you respond as I do, you have a perception of reality that matches mine. The closer the child respondent comes to answering the way the adult researchers do, the more sophisticated the child's perception of reality. In all cases, it is the researcher's adult perception of reality that is implicitly correct. But just what is that perception? In no study do the researchers say: "This is our definition of reality." Philosophers have argued endlessly about reality; the researcher does not care to enter into philosophical arguments on the subject.

The children's answers to the questions posed them (given large groups of children) are different for younger and older children. The older children's are more like adults' (researchers') answers, but how did they get there? The researchers use what they know of children, of theory, and of life to speculate. It is, however, an unsatisfactory situation since they have manuevered the children into such a (hopefully) context-free situation to begin with.

Researchers, in attempting to forecast or analyze children's responses to questions about reality, thought at first that simple variables such as age or IQ or amounts of television viewed might account for differences in responses to questionnaires or interviews. Greenberg and Reeves (1976) found that in the case of age and IQ, the greater the amount, the less perceived reality (of television characters and specific content areas). As far as TV viewing time was concerned, the greater, the more perceived reality. Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979), on the other hand, found that sophistication in reality judgments correlated with age and that "the ability to assess the reality status of various types of television is relatively independent of the child's familiarity with a variety of television programs, and possibly, independent also of the amount of television watched" (p. 12). Hawkins (1977) suggested that perceived reality was multidimensional, along perhaps three dimensions: does the child see television material as drama or real life? Does the television material fit closely or not so closely with life as the child views it? Is the child responding to specific characters or to television in general when the child answers researchers' questions? Reeves, in a 1978 article, agrees that perceived reality may be multidimensional. In his earlier work with Greenberg (1976), they found that "a principal mediator of

the perceptions of character and content reality appears to be interpersonal sources of information" which on their questionnaire meant peers, parents, or siblings (pp. 92-94). Graves (1976) suggests that development of an amount of skepticism, or industry knowledge, may be necessary before the child can judge as an adult does. These studies give us clues to the puzzling responses given by children to questions on the perceived reality of television material. Other sources, and other methodology are necessary to gain a more complete picture.

The Child Learner, Language, and Reality Construction

In addition to what has been suggested about the child's perception of reality from television research itself, there is information available from other bodies of literature on the nature of children and how they learn, and learn through, language. In order to analyze the material gathered in this study, it is necessary to briefly review aspects of some theories that may well explain the data. Primary concern will be with the child learner, language development, and the formation of concepts of reality by human beings.

The Child Learner

Previous research suggests about the child as learner that:

A. The child comes to understand by inventing and re-creating.

B. The child is an active learner. To be an "inventor" the child must be active in learning. This activity may be apparent to the eye, or it may be more hidden, taking place in the child's mind, with little outward sign to an observer.

C. The child uses rules, and generalizes in restructuring what he or she wishes to understand. The child often overapplies a rule, resulting in a mistake to an adult.

D. The child attempts to apply meaning to situations. The child assumes that situations encountered are meaningful and that they can be understood by him or her.

E. Social context is very important to the child learner.

The concepts embodied in A, B, and C above can primarily be traced to the work of the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget. Throughout the stages he describes, the child is seen as an active learner, an inventor, a rule-generator. Children move ahead in restructuring the world on the assumption that they can understand the situations in which they find themselves. But of crucial importance in these situations is the social context in which children are aided in applying these self-generated rules. This social context is the milleau through which and by means of which the child comes to understand. To become a full member of the society into which it is born, the infant must come to re-invent that society. With information sifted through the senses, and focussed (primarily) with the help of the caregiver, the infant must restructure the culture (e.g., American culture of the 20th century). The speech of other humans in the home, their gestures, their patterns of making the bed and making the mashed potatoes: all this is part of the culture children must restructure for themselves. To the infant and young child the television and the programs on it are part of culture, and they represent a way for the child to restructure the society in which he or she lives, to take on that society as his or her own, to become a member in a complete way, to become enculturated.

Language Development and the Child Learner

Researchers interested in aspects of language development and reading development have found that:

A. The child, in recreating a system of language, forms rules to create new forms of language not previously encountered.

B. Meaning, or semantics, is the most important, most motivating subsystem in a communication system.

C. The social aspect of learning to communicate is crucial.

The child, in recreating a system of language, forms rules to create new forms of language not previously encountered. We have evidence on this from work both in language development (see Dale, 1976, for a review of language development studies) and in writing development in spelling (Read, 1975). In language development, this rule-making was discovered when it was noticed that young children were making "mistakes" in the words they were using (e.g., "I hitted the ball."). Now these mistakes had not been copied from the speech of the adult caretaker or other adults, so it was not a case of a child imitating an incorrect form. What occurred to the researchers was that the child was forming rules for language use (in this case, rules for how to express the past tense), then overgeneralizing the rules which, on the one hand, allowed the child to express ideas never heard before, but which eventually got the child into a situation where a mistake was made by generalizing regularity where there was irregularity. Charles Read (1975), in looking at the writing of young children, found children making consistent, but logical, "mistakes" in spelling, that is, not using standard English orthography. They were using the rules and categories they had created to handle the task of putting words they knew orally into print, phoneme to grapheme. These children were good readers, not children with reading and writing difficulties.

What we see then, are two things: (a) the child is a rule-former in dealing with communication systems, and (b) the method some adults have found to be successful in gaining insights into developmental processes in language with young children has been to concentrate on the errors, according to adult

standards, made by the child. Goodman and Burke (1972) analyzed readers' miscues or "mistakes," allowing them insights into the reading process that the readers themselves were unaware of. Once again we find the analysis of children's "mistakes" offering fruitful insight into the child's point of view, and into a system that is well constructed and logical in its own right. The search for "mistakes" by a researcher appears extremely important. Without mistakes, errors, miscues, those rough edges where expectations of adult and child are not aligned, the researcher will have nowhere to get a handle on the process or the reality the informant is experiencing. If each party's expectations always align, everything is smooth, there is no chink, no tiny hole, from which to gain another perspective, no way to get behind the constant front.

Meaning is the essential component of a communication system. Halliday (1975), Goodman (1978) and Smith (1971, 1973) have shown that the child learner understands that the meaning is the essential part of the system. This desire to make meaning is so strong that it will motivate the child in encounters with other communication systems, if there exist ways that a neophyte can begin to interact with and learn about the system. Transfer from one system to another, and the use of adults to aid the process of building the structure of the new system, are two possible ways a young child can learn about the new communication systems encountered. Vygotsky (1962) stated almost fifty years ago: "The primary function of speech, in both children and adults, is communication, social contact" (p. 19). A crucial element in communication for the child learner is the human connection. The caregiver is so close to the young infant that he or she can attach meaning to communication from the baby, often when others see no attempt at communication or, seeing it, are at a loss

to interpret. Halliday calls this ability, appropriately, "tracking."

Reality Formation by Human Beings

Piaget believes reality is constructed by the child, and that the process of constructing reality is continuous (Elkind, 1978). Berger and Luckmann (1966) put forth the idea that reality is socially constructed. They suggest that language is "both the most important content and the most important instrument of socialization" (p. 133). Reality is socially constructed. That means that we, as members of a social group, construct the world the way we think it is, and share these constructions with each other. As we belong to different groups, we must shift our reality constructs in moving from one group to another. Members of the group help each other define reality. They set limits on what is acceptable, what is evidence, what sources are credible. And if group members can be so powerful in defining reality for each other, what of that primary social group, the family? By definition this group is an essential one in the social construction of reality for the young. Awareness of "other realities" such as dream versus awake realities, play versus everyday life realities, are socially defined, and begin to be formulated at a very young age. The child who cries from a dream is comforted. Reality is constructed continuously, socially, through language.

Natural Methodology in Four Homes

The methodology used may be looked at as being in two stages, and is outlined below.

Participant observation

Field notes were kept on one child, the daughter of this researcher, from the age of 4;1 to 6;5 years, bounded by the question of the perception of reality and television. (Data: field notes.)

Here is an example of a field note that I believe is representative in terms of length of notes, and kind of information recorded.

Jenny 5/28/80 7:20 a.m. 6;5 years

Rs watching Today. Jenny is coloring. Ambassador Diego Asencio is talking about being held hostage in Bogota, Colombia. Rs explains that he has been a hostage, although not in the same place as the others she has told Jenny about ((Iran)). Ambassador Asencio is discussing the "Stockholm Syndrome," remarking that it is, as defined by psychologists, fairly unspectacular.

D.A. It doesn't mean you fall in love with them ((the captors))...

J: ((reacts with a slight start and a smile))

He said "in love." You're not supposed to say that on the the news.

T.N. Does this suggest rules that bound acceptability of material for types of programs?

[Key to field notes:

Rs = researcher
J = Jenny
T.N.= theoretical note
( ) = some uncertainty with word
(( )) = explanatory material.]

It is not safe to assume that Jenny was unaware of my interest in television, nor that she was not deliberately remarking on television to get my attention. Two factors may help to offset this problem. The first is that I am with the subject often as a full participant. Therefore Jenny may not be able to keep constantly in mind that I am interested in television activities. A more promising factor is the observation of other children. Do the kind of remarks and behavior I see in Jenny also appear in the language and behavior of other children in their homes?

Natural methods in the homes of three children

Since it is desirable in naturalistic methodology to use information previously acquired to chart the direction of further data gathering, this

phase of the study can perhaps best be seen as a series of steps, each building on the previous work.

1. Finding informants.

   After I decided to go into the homes of children to observe with respect to television and reality, I decided that I might reasonably observe in the homes of three children. The children that I chose were from the preschool that my daughter attended and were, at the time of the study, five years old, as she was. Because I realized that the time for observation would not be extending over months or years, I wanted to work with children that I already knew. Children in the preschool knew me as "Jenny's mother" and I hoped to use this fact to build trust between us. I located two boys, each with an older sibling about eleven years old, and a girl who, like Jenny, was an only child. This latter child had both parents living at home. One of the boys was living with two parents, the other with a single mother.

2. Eliciting information about television programs the children enjoyed.

3. Entering the homes of the three informants as a participant observer on a Friday evening, Saturday morning, and Saturday evening. (Data: field notes and audio cassette tapes and transcriptions. PRIMARY DATA FOR ANALYSIS: Approximately 18 hours of audio tape.)

4. Returning to informants' homes to show three programs enjoyed by informants: Batman, The Muppet Show, and CHiPs! The programs were presented on the television in the home with the aid of a Panasonic VHS (home video) machine. Questions were asked of the children

during each program. (Data: field notes and audio cassette tapes and transcriptions. These notes and tapes will be designated ELICITED INFORMATION to distinguish them from the more natural information collected in step 3.)

5. Interviewing parents using a structured, open-ended instrument. (Data: audio cassette tapes and transcriptions.)
6. Sharing some insights with parents several months later (member check). (Data: field notes.)

Reality Construction in the Viewing Situation: The Structure of an Analysis

The data subjected to analysis consisted of material available from audio tapes, field notes and transcriptions from the Friday evening, Saturday morning, and Saturday evening viewing situations in the homes of three five-year-olds: Amy, Ben, and Nathan. Not all the data labeled "primary" (previous section) were subjected to analysis; representative areas, amounting to approximately half the total primary data, were analyzed. The data analysis was concerned with mapping features of reality construction as evidenced in the primary data. Categories were generated from a smaller representative sample of primary data. Then these categories were tested by being applied to a larger representative sample of primary data. ("Elicited" data were not used because remarks from the children led me to believe that they considered that data gathering situation artificial.) The first step in category generation was to define a unit of analysis. Since I had been struck, as a participant observer, with the frequency of topic changes in conversations during my observation in the homes, it seemed a natural step to the selection of these brief topic segments as the

basic unit for analysis. I constructed a definition of the conversational segment as "the conversation of one or more persons centering on one topical point." I elaborated this definition and wrote it out as a guide to myself in consistently applying the criteria to the rest of the subsection to be used to raise categories, with a view to eventually applying it to the larger sample of data to be analyzed.

> A conversational segment consists of the conversation of one or more persons centering on one topical point. A segment may consist of the offering of a topical point, without response from others. A new conversational segment is signaled (always) by a shift in the conversation to a new topical point, and (often) by an indicator of silence (... or ***: indicating silences of at least three or seven seconds respectively). Intonation patterns also help identify a new conversational segment. A segment is not ended if one party asks for clarification of something mentioned earlier in the segment. The first sentence or two of a long topical point will often state the topic explicitly: 'Incredible Hulk's a good guy.' Conversational segments aid in charting long periods in which participants are engaged in a social event (e.g., watching television). They bring to the surface recurring patterns, and make possible the identification of even smaller units within the segment. They have the advantage of keeping remarks between participants on one topical point together, where these remarks can aid in later judgments.

This concludes the elaboration as I formulated it, but I would like to alert the reader to the fact that the segmenting of the conversation does not imply that topical points were never returned to during a viewing period. Not infrequently a topical point, or more usually, a variation of it, would recur during the viewing, often separated only a segment or two from its earlier occurrence.

Two things were most helpful in segmenting: radical topic change, and periods of silence. Difficulties in segmenting came from subtle shifts in topical points, long conversation with related points brought into the conversation, and lack of audible material. Annoying as segmenting difficulties could be on occasion, I should stress that they were not the usual pattern of

the material. The material was a great mix of television and non-television segments, and conversation on a topical point was brief, moving from one point to another fairly quickly. Television watching, as I observed it, had a "busy" character.

In generating categories from the data, copies of the transcripts along with the tapes themselves, were worked through in small sections. I cut the transcript copies on the basis of conversational segments and taped these protocols on cards. Next I removed the non-television-related material. Finally I searched for similarities among the remaining protocols. I attempted to produce a written definition of similarities (which aided me by making me more aware of inconsistencies in my thinking). Eventually my categories became "segment focus" and "child's perspective" in the areas to be mapped. The other general area was "transactor identification." In explaining the coding system, I use the term "semantic transaction." A transaction, following Rosenblatt (1978, chapter 2), is an exchange such that each person or aspect of the environment involved is altered during the transaction. So, in each segment, one or more persons are altered by the communication, and we can see process of change in their language (and occasionally, behavior) in the segment. Transactions not involving language are unavailable to us in the design of this study. The reason a transaction may involve only one transactor is that a person may have a transaction with him or herself by reflecting on past experience, or by performing television material. Experience, as environment, is an important aspect of a transaction. The transactor further refines understanding, altering the structures within his or her own mind. It is this altering in a communicative setting that I call a transaction. The term "semantic" is used because the transactors are applying meaning to the situation in which they are involved. "Semantic transactions

within conversational segments" refers to this application of meaning by transactors on one topical point.

Now, one of the first things we wish to know about the transactions is who are involved in them. Therefore the first general area to be coded is "transactor identification": who is involved in the transaction, who initiates the transaction, who responds, how many verbal turns are taken in the segment. The second thing we would like to ascertain is what the transactors are doing in this application of meaning: discussing, performing, dealing with social considerations? These are the segment foci. Finally, we want to know what the child's view is in the segment, for that is a central concern of the study. For the taxonomy used, see p. 18.

Internal and External Validity

I am aware that I, as a participant observer, had some bearing on the structure of the data. Guba (1978) suggests that awareness of potentially invalidating factors is the first step in weighing their influence (p. 63).

In my observations in Ben, Nathan, and Amy's homes I attempted to build feelings of trust, awareness of my uncritical acceptance of whatever I encountered in the home, and relaxation in family members I encountered. To this end I wore casual and simple clothes, usually jeans, to deemphasize difference in status ("researcher") or age. I attempted to keep a quiet, but pleasant, accepting, and attentive demeanor. Occasionally, in keeping with my role as participant, I would offer remarks, but I attempted to use my knowledge of television viewing as a member of my culture to guide me in when a remark would be appropriate or expected.

It would be naive of me to suggest that notetaking and taping had no effect on the participants in this situation. Nevertheless, I believe the

Taxonomy of Features of Semantic Transactions Within Conversational Segments

Transactor Identification

1.0 Number and identification of transactors

1.1	C	(child)	1.5	Rs	(researcher)
1.2	M	(mother)	1.6	TV	
1.3	F	(father)	1.7	Other	
1.4	OS	(older sibling)			

2.0 Number of verbal turns

3.0 Verbal initiator of segment

3.1	C	(child)	3.5	Rs	(researcher)
3.2	M	(mother)	3.6	TV	
3.3	F	(father)	3.7	Other	
3.4	OS	(older sibling)			

4.0 Respondor (first only)

4.1	C	(child)	4.5	Rs	(researcher)
4.2	M	(mother)	4.6	TV	
4.3	F	(father)	4.7	Other	
4.4	OS	(older sibling)	4.8	None (0)	

Segment Focus

5.0 Discussion about program/commercial content

5.1	yes	5.2	no

6.0 Discussion about production

6.1	yes	6.2	no

7.0 Performance

7.1	yes	7.2	no

8.0 Social consideration and attitudes

8.1	yes	8.2	no

9.0 Other

9.1	yes	9.2	no

Child's Perspective

10.0 Child's perspective
- 10.1 Demonstrates control of information/explores information
- 10.2 Critical assessment given/requested
- 10.3 Child not recorded in segment

effect was far less on the five-year-olds than it may have been on other participants. To form this judgment I used my knowledge of another five-year-old, my daughter, my slight prior knowledge of Amy, Ben and Nathan in other situations (I did not know the other participants before observation), and my many informal observations at the preschool the four children attended. I believe these gave me a basis for noting unusual or uncomfortable behavior on the part of the children. The children did question me a few times on the taping or notetaking. I tried to answer their questions honestly but briefly.

Guba suggests that in naturalistic study it is possible to view the researcher as the instrument (1981, chapter 6). The researcher, as a member of the culture, is able to bring into play tacit knowledge that aids him or her in sifting through evidence in judging data. I offer as evidence in this regard my search for "good data" that led to my rejection of the pilot study I had conducted and the eventual rejection for analysis of the material I had gathered with the home video machine.

In addressing other strategies of checking for internal validity: I attempted to keep a skeptical state of mind with regard to emerging hypotheses. I attempted to weigh what I saw against what I had observed in my own home over a long period of time. I checked my data against that of other researchers involved in data collection in the home viewing situation from a different perspective. Did our data look similar? My answer was yes. It is true that these are other cases of participant observation, and must endure all the threats to internal validity as does my study, but it helps assure me that my data are not idiosyncratic, or unduly affected by my presence. (This particular check also has application to reliability of findings.) I depended on contact with the children before and after the collection of data, contact with

parents after collection, and the observation of Jenny as a method of measuring the internal validity of results.

If indeed the data gathered were true to life for the situation in which they were gathered, does it then follow that they are applicable to any other situations or to larger populations (external validity)? If an observational study is reported in enough detail, those readers wishing to apply the "working hypotheses" (Guba, 1978, p. 70) in another situation should be able to analyze the similarities or differences between the two situations to decide whether the hypotheses from one might transfer to the other. It has also been suggested (Denzin, 1977, chapter 3) that sampling should be done in representative ways in order to deal with the question of external validity in naturalistic study. In this study the selection of Friday and Saturday evenings, and Saturday morning viewing offered situations in which television viewing appeared less obstructed by other family concerns, (e.g., homework, meetings) and also offered the opportunity to sample children's programming along with programming aimed at a larger audience.

Reliability

One way of dealing with the question of replicability in naturalistic design is the use of the "audit" (Guba, 1978, p.71). In this method another researcher examines the system of categorization devised by the original researcher, checking to see whether the categories make sense considering the data the researcher was using, and whether the data were "appropriately arranged into a category system" (p. 71). In addition to doing this with one researcher, I chose subsections of data to be coded by myself and a third researcher, chosen, as the second had been, for experience in research and the application of coding systems, and chosen for the painstaking care they

exhibited in such situations and for their ability to add insights that might refine the system. Rater reliability achieved ranged from .75 to 1.00.

Reality Construction in the Viewing Situation: Patterns for Constructing Comprehension

After performing the analysis on representative sections of data from the naturally occurring television viewing in the homes of Amy, Nathan, and Ben, I then searched for recurring patterns that would suggest ways in which these young children were structuring the reality of their world as that world involved television. Four patterns helpful in the construction of reality could be observed in the data. The first might be termed a pattern of "situation." The others were strategies of the children for gathering information related to television.

The Transactive Situation

The persons involved in the transactive television setting transact often with each other, but not always about television or the viewing situation. When the focus is on television, the two areas most often coded were discussion about program/commercial content, and social considerations and attitudes ("Sit down, Amy."). The high occurrence of social considerations may be something of a surprise. Yet I think it argues well for the importance of the social nature of the television viewing situation.

The Child Initiates and Participates--Helping to Create the Environment

We see proof of an active child in these segments. It is as if the child is always demanding to know, and will transact with any participant to satisfy that need. A segment involving one of the children was most common, involving 89% of the segments. This number may be artificially high because of

my presence. However, since children frequently draw heavily on others to fill the needs experienced, this would argue that these results of heavy initiation by the child are not atypical. It is to the child's benefit to be a participant in the conversational segments. The child can explore information as he or she is constructing reality. Parents or siblings can make corrections, which can then be negotiated or rejected. One example is Nathan's segment 100, produced during a commercial for the movie Alien (a science fiction horror movie):

N100

TV: ((Eerie music))

N: Who's this? It's strange.

OS ((older sibling)): Alien.

N: You don't know that. Egg. What is that thing?

TV: Alien. Rated R.

N: What is that thing?

* * *

The Child Performs Television Material

A third pattern noticeable in the data was that of the child performing television material, without adult/sibling involvement in the conversational segment. The pattern was most evident in the Saturday morning viewing, although it was present in all time periods. In the performance pattern, the child either (a) imitated the audio material after it was produced, at the same moment, or in anticipation, or (b) performed television-like material. Here are examples from Ben and Amy's viewing on Saturday morning.

B125

TV: Stay tuned for more exciting advantures with Tarzan and the Super Seven!

B: Super se-ps, ss-

* * *

A137

TV: ((Starburst candy commercial)) Lime! Orange!

A: Lemon!

TV: Lemon!

* * *

It would seem that these cartoons and commercials are giving these children a chance to become more skilled comprehenders of television material (or at least more skilled in predicting the audio portion of the material). The repetition of material (so annoying to adults) appears to give the young child a chance to become so familiar with the material that he or she can produce it on cue. This sense of developing control is very satisfying to the child.

The Child Manipulates the Viewing Situation

The efforts of parents and children to manipulate the viewing situation in order to gain one's own choices were seen as the fourth pattern in the data. In order to be an effective manipulator, one must first of all be knowledgeable. One must know the other manipulators and their strategies, and one must have one's own manipulative strategies ready to combat those of the others. Particularly efficacious is programming knowledge, which may put one in an advantageous position to bargain for viewing choices.

Consider then manipulation of the viewing situation and the elements of time sequences, channel selection, choice of options, and negotiation of choice in this example drawn from Amy's Saturday morning viewing:

A125

A: Frank--is um Superfriends gonna be on tonight--today?

F: It's on right now.

A: Oh.

F: That's what you wanna watch, huh?

A: Uh huh. What channel is it on?

F: You have it on the right channel don't you?

A: Eight!

F: Yeah, that's the channel....

A: Is that the channel for Superfriends?

F: Yes.

A: (Oh.)...

Although adults casually observing children watching television may believe the young child is randomly groping for clues whenever opportunity for choice arises, careful consideration of these segments, shows that judgment false. The children consistently ask for time, channel numbers, express their preferences or ask for information if a new choice is suddenly an option. The social, transactive nature of the setting aids them. Their parents are available to give them information when they require it. The children themselves are initiating segments and/or continuing them, to find what they need. And now we see that they are elaborately piecing together one of the foremost requirements for satisfying television viewing in a social situation: finding the programs that you like, and keeping the set tuned to those programs. They are manipulating the situation so that it best fulfills their needs. They also use the social, transactive nature of the setting, their initiating strategy, with the performance strategy, to piece together comprehension of the television material. They are constructing the reality of their world, then, as it pertains to television, and television to it, in two basic ways (according to this data): understanding the television material, and understanding the demands of the viewing situation (understanding the programming schedule, evaluating

the offerings, negotiating the viewing). We may also say that they are using transactions with: other people, the television material, pertinent non-viewing experiences (A17 "are you interested in watching um about an oil spill? You remember Daddy was reading about one?"), and their own bodies as they play at television material, as information sources in constructing reality. And we must say that the social nature of the setting where transactions take place appears crucial to the transactions, and to reality construction. See Figure 1 for a representation of these key elements presented as a picture of conversational segment A107 [F: Sit down, (Amy).]

The Young Child, Reality Construction, and Television

Using the four patterns discerned in the data, the naturalistic researcher should be able to move to generation of theory. Accordingly, seven theoretical propositions can be stated from careful consideration of the patterns observed and applicable theory in the field.

Theoretical Propositions

1. The social aspects of this communication medium and the nature of the social communicator are important in constructing comprehension both of the material itself and of the viewing situation.

2. The young child viewer is a social communicator, willing and able to transact with other communicators.

3. The young child is actively processing material when watching television.

4. The young child transacts with television material, pertinent non-viewing experiences, other people, and his/her own body, all across time, as these are information sources for understanding the viewing situation and television material.

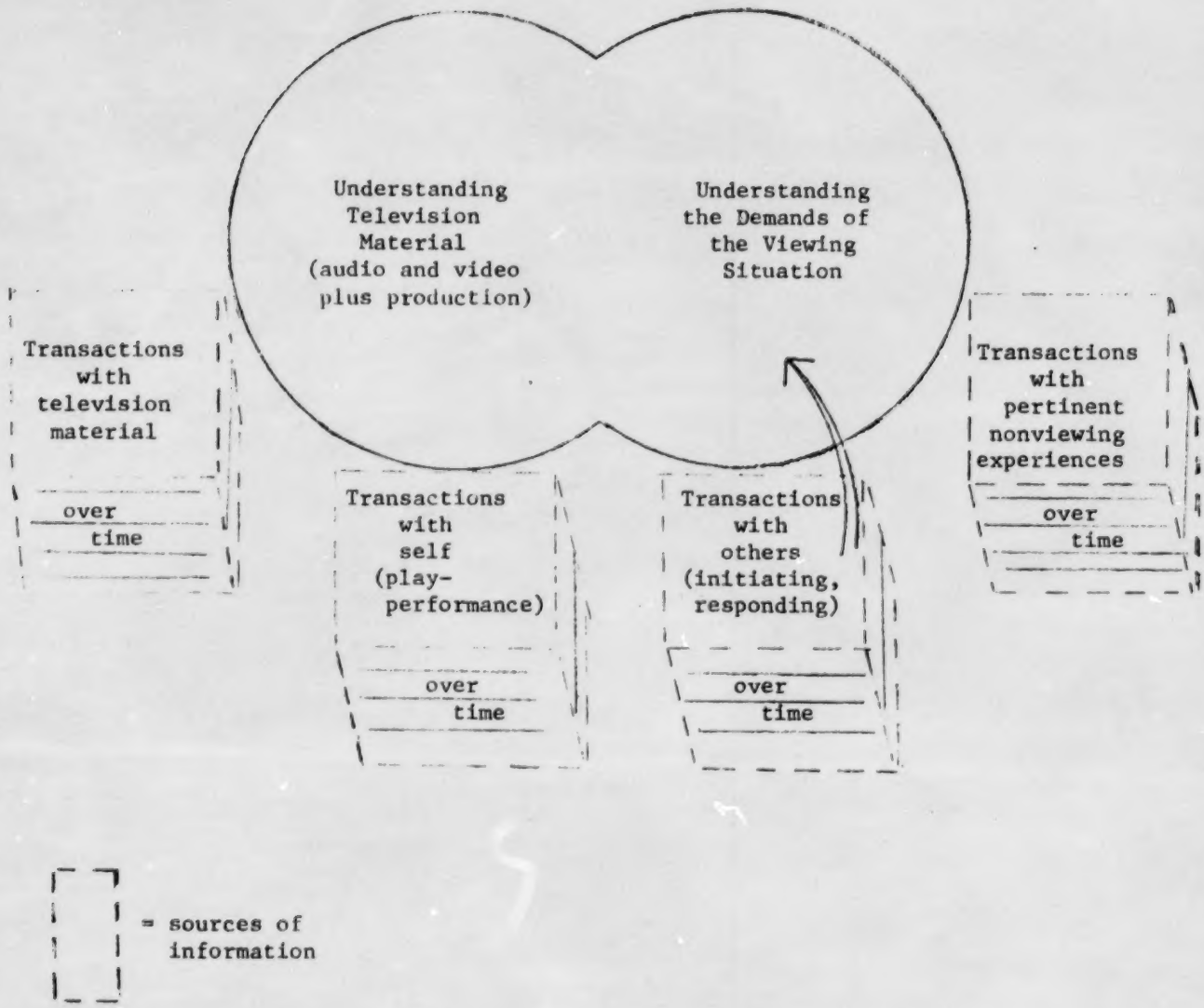
Understanding Television Material (audio and video plus production)
Understanding the Demands of the Viewing Situation
Transactions with television material
over time
Transactions with self (play-performance)
over time
Transactions with others (initiating, responding)
over time
Transactions with pertinent nonviewing experiences
over time
= sources of information

Figure 1. A representation of key elements in the child's social construction of reality in connection with television, presented as a stop-action picture of conversational segment A107.

5. Transactions with material (viewing or nonviewing) eventually affect the material as well as the viewer. The process here can be very slow compared to transactions with others or self.

6. Ability to manipulate the viewing situation is an important ability to a social transactor, the young television viewer.

7. Certain motivational forces for viewing can be seen in the preceding propositions and in the data. These forces are:

a. the transactive social situation

b. a developing control of the viewing situation

c. a developing control of television content.

Growth Errors: The Young Child's Perception of Television Reality

If we view the child as being in the process of developing the adult view of reality in a particular cultural subgroup, we still are left with the question that was bothersome in the beginning of this study: why do children appear to give the answers they do when questioned by adults about the reality of particular items on or about television? It appears from the data in this study that there are three things that the young child is influenced by when attempting to deal with the type of questions that researchers generally pose about the reality of television material. The first influence is experiencial background. The second is stage of development (Piaget). The third is the rule-making that children engage in when cued to move to more abstract thinking in which they may feel somewhat less comfortable or which they may view as unnecessary. In the preoperational stage, the child is more comfortable with a literal, or surface explanation of a question. Therefore, when cued that appearances might be deceiving (as with researchers' questions), the child attempts to move in the direction indicated, and gives an answer that, based

on his or her own experience,is possible, is rule-governed, and is still a comfortable surface-level interpretation. Several children in the laboratory pilot study I performed, Jenny and Nathan, all exhibited this particular rule when making statements that were growth errors (errors from the adult view, signs of growth and attempts to do more difficult analysis from the child's view). They all indicated that people are physically under the appearance, or are pretending when they were interpreting difficult material. (This is not the only rule exhibited, but was interesting in its appearance across these children.)

Jenny 5/23/79 8:30 p.m. 5;4 years

We are watching The Third Barry Manilow Special. Jenny said something about Donny and Marie. ("I wonder where Marie is.") On questioning, she indicated that Barry Manilow was Donny with a mask. I thought she might have made this assumption because of his style--he had just done an audience-involved number, similar to the kind of thing Donny Osmond does. I asked Jenny how she had known.

Rs: What should my brain have told me so I would have known it was Donny?

J: His suit ((white suit, like those Donny often wears)), his mask, and he curled his hair, he curled a wig.

Conclusions

In constructing reality the young child is actively creating a workable knowledge of the world as it exists for members of his or her own social group. These social aspects of reality construction of television (and, we assume, of messages applied to print or oral media), have largely been overlooked in past studies attempting to ascertain the young child's perception of television reality. The young child is an active communicator, manipulating the television situation and even the television messages (through performance) in order to apply meaning to what is being observed. In applying meaning, the child uses and eventually overgeneralizes rules, consistent with experiencial

background and stage of development, to make sense of television in our culture. Repetition in commercials and cartoons, so boring and annoying to adults, appears to be of assistance when the child applies meaning to television material.

Data from this study conspire to force an acknowledgement from us that the social aspects of constructing reality in connection with television material and the viewing situation are of great importance, and must be carefully attended to.

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